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ABSTRACT

Four twentieth century playwrights--Pirandello, Giraudoux, O'Neill, and Albee--differed in their solutions to the human dilemma and in their philosophic apprehensions of human dilemma, but all four showed interest in the basic concerns of all humanity: body and soul, appearance and reality, the real and the ideal. Albee, the only one of the four now living, professes a radically different approach to what the theater arts should be about. However, he does reveal some similarity to the other three. He feels man's existence is absurd because of its lack of purpose. Pirandello's "Henry IV," 1922, makes explicit the enigma of existence as well as the duality of personality. Eugene O'Neill's plays are concerned with illusion and reality for two reasons: he was interested in man's relationship with God and in man's finding himself. Thus, he innovated endlessly with the mask as a means of man's finding himself in the real world while maintaining his spiritual and mystical kinship with the world of imagination. Jean Giraudoux was somewhat anachronistic in that he neither worshipped the past (ancient myth) nor followed the herd (allied himself with the Theater of the Absurd). (SW)

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MODERN DRAMA

Illusion: The Recall to Sanity

by
Sara Spottswood

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Illusion: The Recall to Sanity

To possess a soul which yearns and cries for union with Something larger than itself while being bound by earthly chains —an immortal soul within a mortal prison— is not unknown by even Shakespeare's most subhuman creations. In The Tempest, Caliban weeps as he admonishes his fellow travelers, Stephano and Trinculo, to be not afraid as they search for the magician, Prospero:

> The isle is full of noises,
> Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
> Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
> Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
> That, if I then waked after long sleep,
> Will make me sleep again. And then, in dreaming,
> The clouds methought would open and show riches
> Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked,
> I cried to dream again.

Wherein lies the remedy? How does man resolve the dichotomy of the human predicament, or at least live with it? Artists —writers, playwrights, poets, painters, sculptors, actors, dancers— attempt to bridge the gulf between the visible and the invisible. Jean Giraudoux, 1882-1944, who lived his entire life with a foot in both worlds, one in that of art or fantasty and the other in public service or politics, rather sadly and yet succinctly described the dilemma in his first lecutre on Jean de La Fontaine:

> We are often tired out, when evening comes, because we do not enjoy from sunrise to sunset the unity of heart, of custom, of occupation or of enjoyment which is the

> privilege of non-human creatures. And in the evening of our life we die, worn out by this division of ourselves which is so often painful, by this effort to adapt ourselves which proves so useless in the end.

. . .

The ritual begins...and that's what it really is, this communion between player and playgoer...when the playgoer, settling into his theatre seat, relaxes into a state of "willing suspension of disbelief." And that's what it takes for the ritual to be successful. The playgoer, corporally withdrawn from reality, must simultaneously withdraw his "believing being" —spiritual and intellectual being— from reality in order to accept fully the couple hours' worth of illusion which the player has to give him.

Why? Is this escape from the external world of reality a "cop out"...an admission that the playgoer has "had it" for the time being and requires respite? So what if it is? This escape into "illusion" is somewhat paradoxical, for what else is the playgoer doing but exchanging his world of reality for someone else's world of reality. And it very well may be that the "world of illusion" is much grimmer than that from which the playgoer has taken leave.

If such be the case, considering the content of many modern plays and films, is the playgoer a masochist? Not so. The raison d'etre of playgoing is ancient. Aristotle recognized the need for catharsis. It still exists. We desperately need "illusion" -be it theatre or cinema- regardless of the fact that this illusion is but another person's conception of reality. For it is this illusion which strangely enough

strengthens us and allows us to return to our individual realities a bit more capable to cope.

Understand, please, that I am not a pragmatist regarding the role of theatre, or art itself, in our lives. Theatre to me is church, and I've participated in the ritual both as priest-player and as communicant-playgoer. Although I do not prescribe theatre to be the panacea for all the ills of a media-jaded society, I do believe that an occasional "dose" —be it reading a play, seeing a play, directing a play or acting in a play—is rejuvenating.

Many twentieth century playwrights, obviously concerned about the plight of modern man, have dramatized his essential loneliness and his isolation and alienation from society and from nature. Most of you are no doubt familiar with this as the dramatic concern of such playwrights as Luigi Pirandello, Eugene O'Neill, Jean Giraudoux and Edward Albee. Interestingly enough, all of these playwrights have either occasionally, frequently or consistently dramatically implied that only through illusion can we discern reality. This is understandable, however, since Pirandello, a writer of ideas who profoundly influenced O'Neill, Giraudoux and Albee, rescued us from the theatre of naturalism and anti-naturalism. Pirandello was an innovator, much like Ibsen, whose ideas —such as the relativity of truth, the duality of personality, and that the ultimate reality of art is opposed to the basic unreality of life— are very much alive today.

Caught in the grim dilemma of the human condition, man's only hope for a recall to sanity is to take leave of apparent reality. How the character "takes leave" depends of course upon the playwright, upon the character and upon the dramatic circumstances.

Today I would like to introduce some ideas and selected readings from these four twentieth century playwrights. Although in their solutions to the human dilemma they may differ and even in their philosophic apprehension of the dilemma they may vary, it is obvious that they are driven by the same "tiger."

Three, although chronologically peers and now no longer living, Pirandello, Giraudoux and O'Neill, certainly put their plays together in their own fashion; at the same time they share a similar attitude toward illusion and reality. The fourth, Albee, who is very much living, while professing a radically different approach to what the "stuff" of theatre should be about nevertheless reveals in his work an undeniable kinship to the first three. In other words, all four, despite differences in time, nationality, education and religious persuasion, are "brothers" as concerns the two basic concerns of all humanity, namely, body and soul, appearance and reality, the real and the ideal.

"It's like this," explains Henry IV to the Marchioness, "We are all fixed in good faith in a certain concept of ourselves [and yet] has it never happened to you, my lady, to find a different self in yourself?" The enigma of existence

as well as duality of personality is made explicit in Pirandello's play Henry IV, 1922, as the character Henry IV continues: "What does it matter that this dyed hair of mine isn't a reality for you, if it is, to some extent, for me?" The ultimate irony of this character who proclaims he acted with free will in choosing his mask is that he becomes locked in Henry IV: "I can't free myself from this magic"...the "magic" being his illusion...his mask and his reality all at once.

Eugene O'Neill, possibly one of the greatest American playwrights and certainly one of the first to emerge internationally, belongs to our group concerned with illusion and reality for two reasons: because he was interested in man's relationship with God, and because he innovated endlessly with the Mask as a means of man's finding himself in the real world while maintaining his spiritual and mystical kinship with the world of imagination.

The Great God Brown, 1925, is actually a dramatization of the idea of "mask as a symbol of inner reality." Much has been written concerning manipulation of the masks and yet comparatively little concerning the significance of this most dramatic convention. This truly enigmatic play can be interpreted on several levels. In terms of O'Neill's "dogma for the new masked drama," the playwright is exploring one's outer life as he passes it in a solitude haunted by the masks of others and one's inner life as he passes it in a solitude bounded by the masks of oneself.

O'Neill explains his selection of names (or masks, if you will): Dion Anthony, being a combination of Dionysus and

St. Anthony, symbolizes "the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Anthony -the whole struggle resulting in this modern day in mutual exhaustion- creative joy in life for life's sake frustrated, rendered abortive, distorted by morality from Pan into Satan..." We have Cybele, the obvious pagan Earth Mother, patronized by those who doom her to segregation; ironically, she is the only one who can express any certainty in life for its own sake whereas her patrons become victims of their own moral code. Margaret as the direct descendent of Marguerite of *Faust* and Brown as the visionless demigod of the materialistic or Success myth complete the principal cast of characters and masks. These four, operating definitely on at least two levels --one human and the other symbolic and mysterious, go through the motions of aspiration, frustration, deception, and aspiration again. In writing this play, O'Neill was interested in creating "the mystery any one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event -or accident- in any life on earth."

This "mystery" which O'Neill wishes to achieve in theatre is certainly in accord with his philosophic credo:

> So when I argue here for a non-realistic imaginative theatre I am hoping, not only for added scope for playwright and director and scenic designer, but also for a a chance for the actor to develop his art beyond the narrow range to which our present theatre condemns it. Most important of all, from the standpoint of future American culture, I am hoping for added imaginative scope for the audience, a chance for the public I know is growing yearly more numerous and more hungry in its spiritual need to

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> participate in imaginative interpretations of life rather than merely identify itself with faithful surface resemblances of living.

O'Neill recognized the sickness of society as does Albee; he recognized the death of the old God and the failure of science and materialism to meet the necessary satisfying need. But, unlike Albee, he sought something new --though it be ancient myth-- and tried to build big works on big subjects rather than bemoan the littleness of all about him. O'Neill used masks to celebrate life, not to stifle life behind the mundane masks we as the living must wear.

To return to Jean Giraudoux, obviously one of my favorites, he was somewhat anachronistic in that he neither worshipped the past (ancient myth) nor followed herd (allied himself with the Theatre of the Absurd). Falling somewhat between tragedy and comedy, he had an "uncanny ability to create [...] a theatre of the unreal [...] a theatre in which the natural order is the supernatural, and the non human exhibits in its relations to humanity a calm assurance which makes highly questionable the reality to which we are accustomed..."

To support this idea that even in the most unlike play wrights there abides some similitude regarding the nature of reality, let's compare a selection from Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf by Edward Albee with one from The Enchanted by Jean Giraudoux, considering first the basic philosophical belief of each concerning man's plight. Giraudoux, occupying a middle ground which permitted neither the complacency of belief nor the torment of doubt, plays the sorcerer; he entangles the jest with the

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truth. In his world, particularly as depicted in The Enchanted, there are infinite points of connection between the visible world and the invisible. Are not these uncertainties related in part to Albee's definition of The Theatre of the Absurd:

> As I get it, The Theatre of the Absurd is an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempts to make sense for himself out of his senseless position in a world which makes no sense - which makes no sense because the moral, religious, political, and social structures man has erected to "illusion" himself have collapsed.

Whereas Giraudoux, aware that reality and appearance are indistinguishable, accepts man's plight "joyously" and depicts it comically, Albee does an about face. Illusions scare Albee, as they did Camus who felt that man was comfortable in a world which could be explained only by reasoning, "'but in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger.'" Albee and Camus were at once afraid of the absence and the presence of "illusion." Thus the absurdity of existence in a land of no hope. Albee mercilessly strips the mask and reveals reality sans illusion, thereby inflicting pain upon both player and playgoer. Giraudoux actually does the same thing, but gently and not categorically; Giraudoux makes no pronouncements and thus leaves us wondering whereas Albee says "This is IT!"

For the sake of definition, Albee belongs with those writers - Camus, Ionesco, Esslin- who feel man's existence is absurd because of its lack of purpose: "'Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become sense less, absurd, useless.'" Albee's attitude is obviously "face it!"

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The result of this attitude is explicit in Virginia Woolf , 1962, a monumental work in itself. But keep in mind, George and Martha have been playing their little charade - or illusion if you will - for quite some time precisely because they could not face it. However, after living with George and Martha for nearly four hours, one cannot help but believe that these two characters will forever be George and Martha - with or without illusion, with or without reality. They can't accept reality with grace, nor can they believe in the myth: their son.

GEORGE. We got a little surprise for you, baby. It's about

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MARTHA: I...am...George...I...am... (George nods, slowly. Silence. Tableau.)

Moving now from the denuded Martha, who is perhaps as sterile as she is frustrated, let's examine Giraudoux's symbol for a better and purer world...the young girl. Three of Giraudoux's plays, Ondine, The Enchanted and The Apollo of Bellac, are very similar in that the girl, nexus between the world of matter and that of spirit, overreaches, flirts with infinity, but returns to the everyday world. There's this basic difference between Albee, and the school he epitomizes, and Giraudoux: Giraudoux -perhaps because he can envision- acknowledges the existence of two worlds, the real and the ideal.

The Enchanted (Intermezzo, 1933) best illustrates Giraudoux's position that although mankind, represented by Isabel, may yearn to be at peace with the whole of creation, mankind can realize the "ideal" only in the "real." In other words, human perfectibility is an impossibility. Nevertheless, man may try to achieve harmony and by his very act of trying he actually fulfills his mission. In short, Giraudoux celebrates both the infinite and the finite in man.

In this scene from The Enchanted the Supervisor tries to recall Isabel from beyond the edge and indirectly woos her; Isabel pleads her case for vision beyond the natural. Both are right.

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SUPERVISOR. The administration thinks your interests are abnormal.

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ISABEL. Or save you all.

Man with his Mask - or his illusion - on Life's stage searching for Truth, for Reality, for Sanity. Certainly this was nothing new for Pirandello, for whom dramatic form — Life and Theatre - were one and the same. As Eric Bentley reminds us, Pirandello "believed that the essentially human thing was not merely to live, as the beasts do, but also to see yourself living, to think." In a sense, it's rather the old play within a play formula: Man stands before a mirror and observes himself with full knowledge of what he is about. Man's thinking, to Pirandello, however, is subordinate to his feeling which produces its own

lucidity. He feels and then he ponders upon that.

The Pirandellian character, suffering in his search for truth, follows a kinetic pattern of deception, outrage and remedy by a larger deceit. The pattern is not new. The character, suddenly aware that he's been deluded suffers anguish and knows he must end this anguish if he's to continue living. Thus he invents for himself another deceit --an illusion which enables him to cope with reality, or at least bear with it. Since the chosen illusion (or delusion) necessarily becomes a reality in which the character must dwell, this can be summarized quite simply: if one can exercise thought and control over his external circumstances he quickly discovers that the world exists in his own head. Thus, he can <u>choose</u> his world.

Retain this concept, but let's return for a moment to the closing scenes of The Tempest. Ferdinand has no sooner expressed his desire "to live here ever./ So rare a wondered father and a wise/ Makes this place Paradise." than his father-in-law finds it expedient to end the revels and send the spirits away. However, Prospero placates Prospero and not just Ferdinand when he explains that

> These our actors
> As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, into thin air.
> And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself
> Yes, all which it inherit --shall dissolve
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on, and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

Begging Ferdinand to "bear with my weakness, my old brain is

troubled," Prospero is "vexed" not so much with the reconciliation of the disparate and warring elements on the island as with how he must readjust his personal world when he rejoins humanity. His rough magic he must abjure and in so doing he must break the illusion which sustained him in his isolation. By play's end, Prospero, rather pathetically, accepts his inevitable denouement upon his return to "my Milan, where/ Every third thought shall be my grave."

However, Prospero does promise the story of his life to Alonzo, King of Naples, and his train. Having seen Prospero in action I think we can safely surmise that he continues "improvising," creating illusions as such are necessary, until the end. In this respect, Prospero is not unlike the Pirandellian man who, even with his multiple personality, is isolated not only from his fellows but from himself at other times. Prospero will improvise as the occasion demands, if for no other reason than that Life itself is Improvisation.

Putting aside Shakespeare for the moment, of the four modern playwrights we have scanned - Pirandello, O'Neill, Giraudoux and Albee — I rather cling to the conviction that Giraudoux preached the purest gospel concerning theatre, both in theory and in practice. He believed in the theatre of "real divination":

> ...the one which reveals to men these amazing truths - that the living must live, that the living must die, that autumn follows summer, spring follows winter, that there are four elements,

> happiness, millions of catastrophes, that life is a reality, that it is a dream, that man lives by peace, that man lives by blood...

"The public recall of those incredible splendors whose visions disturb and overwhelm audiences by night" is the theatre which enheartened Giraudoux and made him consider the playwright's task a daily one...a mission. It goes without saying that the relationship between the theatre and the church is obvious, since the former was born in the latter. However, Giraudoux words it rather nicely: theatre "is what the audience goes to, on gala evenings /.../ toward the illuminated confession of its petty and giant destinies." Thus, illusion, be it sacred, the church, or profane, the theatre, keeps intact our workaday world, reality, and thereby our very sanity.

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